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ABSTRACT

Close relationships have been identified as moderators of stress and as enhancing well-being. A model of friendship based on a conception of self (Wright, 1974) which delineates several relationship dimensions was used to study the qualitative components and sex differences in close relationships. Elderly widows and widowers (N=50) were interviewed and completed the Wright Acquaintance Description Form (ADF), an 80 item questionnaire measuring the 8 dimensions conceputualized in Wright's model of friendship. Differences in mean level of the dimensions were analyzed by sex of respondent and by relationship of close person. Results showed that 44% of the men reported closest relationships with males. Of the women 72% reported closest relationships with females; only 28% reported close relationships with males. Women rated their closest person as more unique/open and the bond as stronger than did men. No other sex differences were found. The data lend support to Wright's (1981) theory that sex differences in interpersonal relationships diminish as the duration and closeness of the bond increases. (JAC)

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# The Alleged Inferiority of Men's Close Interpersonal Relationships: An Examination of Sex Differences in the Elderly Widowed

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# The Alleged Inferiority of Men's Close Interpersonal Relationships: An Examination of Sex Differences in the Elderly Widowed

Sandra E. Candy-Gibbs

More than a century of philosophizing (Simmel, 1906 for example) and a decade of research has hinted at and sometimes reported sex differences in the close interpersonal relationships of adults at various stages or ages in the life cycle. The present study investigated sex differences in the close interpersonal relationships of the elderly widowed. Informal social support has been identified as an important mediating factor in adjustment to various life transitions (e.g., Cobb, 1976; Lowenthal and Weiss, 1976). Previous research has debated whether widowhood is more stressful for men than it is for women. The present study focused upon several theoretically salient dimensions hypothesized to characterize close interpersonal relationships. It was hypothesized that a more specific delineation of dimensions in close relationships would further clarify previous inconsistent findings regarding the nature of social support present in the informal relationships of the elderly widowed.

## Quantitative vs. Qualitative Indices of Interpersonal Relationships and Sex Differences

The majority of research that has been conducted on informal interpersonal relationships in adulthood has primarily ascertained sex differences two ways: 1) by focusing on frequency of interaction with kin, non-kin (friends, neighbors, etc.) and/or by totaling the number of friends and relatives in respondent's network and using these as indices of relationship strength and/or by 2) focusing solely upon the

quantity of "intimacy" obtained by a respondent within a close relationship. (The construct of "intimacy" has also been referred to as "emotional support," "self-disclosure," "ego-support" to list just a few examples.) It has been assumed that greater frequencies of interaction, more friends and/or higher levels of intimacy all imply closer supportive (even superior) interpersonal relationships and hence higher morale in an individual. This has not been consistently reported in previous research (see Lowenthal and Haven, 1968; Neugarten, Havighurst and Tobin, 1968 as examples). Research which has employed frequency of interaction (face-to-face visiting) to assess close interpersonal relationships in late adulthood has reported: 1) women interact with others more frequently than men (Philblad and Adams, 1972; Rosow, 1967); 2) men interact more frequently with others than women (Powers and Bultena, 1976) and lastly 3) men and women do not significantly differ in their rate of interaction with others (Petrowsky, 1976). Generalizations from inconsistent results are difficult, due to sample differences (rural versus urban) and differing methodologies between studies. This research which indicates the number of social bonds present in a network, or rate of interaction with these people, fails to identify the meaning or qualitative nature of the interpersonal relationships. Additionally, the quantitative measurement of only "intimacy" fails to assess other psychological constructs perhaps equally salient in a supportive relationship.

Qualitatively, women's close interpersonal relationships have been described as being affectively richer than men's (Booth, 1972; Booth and Hess, 1974; Candy, 1977), involving a greater number of confidants or intimate friends (Lowenthal and Haven, 1968; Powers and Bultena, 1976).

Men have been described as "inexpressive" (Balswick and Peek, 1971), with intimacy confined primarily within the marital relationship (Lowenthal and Robinson, 1976). This has been hypothesized to be one factor which places the widower at greater risk than the widow (Berardo, 1970). Men have also been described as having a wider range of social contacts than women, who develop fewer contacts that tend to be more intimate and enduring (Booth, 1972; Hess, 1972; Powers and Bultena, 1976). Women have been shown to emphasize greater reciprocity (helping, emotional support and confiding) when compared to men (Weiss and Lowenthal, 1975). Men have been reported to rate similarity within a close relationship as more salient than do women (Weiss and Lowenthal, 1975). Weiss and Lowenthal have reported in their research on four stages of life (high school seniors, newly-wed, empty nesters, and pre-retirees) that women not only gave more detailed descriptions of their friendships than did men, but thatwomen also scored higher than men on friendship complexity. That is, women perceived a greater number of different dimensions characteristic of their friendship network than did men. Qualitative data seem to allege that men's close relationships are inferior, if intimacy is the most valued component in informal interpersonal relationships.

## Sex Differences in Interpersonal Relationships in Widowhood

In summarizing data which specifically compare the interpersonal relationships of elderly widows vs. widowers, it has been found that widows report more interactionwith friends, neighbors, children and grandchildren than do widowers (Kunkel, 1979; Philblad and Adams, 1972).

However, widowers reported more satisfaction with how frequently they saw these people when compared to widows (Kunkel, 1974). Berardo (1967) has reported that not only do widowers appear more isolated than widows, but also less satisfied with their relationships than widows. In comparing groups of married and widowed older adults, Atchley (1975) presented contrary evidence showing widowers more likely than widows to increase contact with friends after death of spouse and hence appear less isolated. Using longitudinal data, Heyman and Gianturco (1973) reported no change in activity level for men or women after death of spouse, with activity level remaining relatively high for both groups. Philblad and Adams (1972) found rural elderly males to be more drastically affected by widowhood than females. Men showed a linear decline in most types of participation with increasing length of widowhood, while women's activity patterns showed no change. Inconsistencies in this data may be explained by the fact some were longitudinal studies, while others employed comparison groups measured at one point in time (cross-sectional), with additional differences in measuring instruments and sampling procedures (samples vary on SES, rural vs. urban life-style, length of time since death of spouse, etc.).

## Interpersonal Relations With Kin vs. Non-Kin in Widowhood

Past research has found, with some consistency that interaction with children is not significantly related to the morale of the elderly, while contact with friends and neighbors is (Arling, 1976; Blau, 1973; Perlman et al., 1979; Philblad and Adams, 1972; Rosow, 1967; Wood and Robertson, 1978). This finding may be related to qualititative differences in types of support received from kin when compared to non-kin (i.e., economic, instrumental needs fulfilled within the family vs. social-emotional needs

fulfilled by non-kin) (Lopata, 1978) and differences in feelings of obligation (more obligation experiences within the family). However, family members have been found to provide not only instrumental but emotional support (Lopata, 1978, 1979; Wood and Robertson, 1978). In a nationwide survey of 718 adults fifty years and older (Depner and Ingersoll, 1980) it was reported that family members actually were more supportive than friends as measured by total frequency of various types of support (health care, discussion of personal problems, etc.). Relating this finding to previous research may imply that even though family members may be providing higher levels of support (care when ill, discussion of health or personal problems) it may be viewed as an obligatory relationship, hence not contributing to morale as much as a nonobligatory friend relationship, given similar support is provided by the friend.

Interaction with adult children has been reported to be more frequent for widows than widowers (Arling, 1976; Longino and Lipman, 1981; Philblad and Adams, 1972). Widows have also reported receiving more total support from their children and siblings than do widowers (Depner and Ingersoll, 1980). This is most probably influenced by the finding that women, and not men, have been described as maintaining ties with adult children. Therefore with widowhood, men have a higher probability of experiencing decreasing kin support than do women.

## Focus of Present Study

Given that previous research has neglected to concurrently quantify several qualitatively different psychological dimensions theoretically

present in the close interpersonal relationships of the older widowed, it was proposed that inconsistencies in past research might be resolved if this task was undertaken. Specifically, the study of sex differences in close interpersonal relationships of the elderly widowed (even the elderly in general) has rarely been based on a model of close interpersonal relationships. The present study investigated the close interpersonal relationships of the elderly widowed using a model of close interpersonal relationships developed by Wright (1974) to: 1) describe several qualitatively distinct dimensions of these relationships; 2) measure sex differences on these dimensions and from this information; and 3) discuss the possible inferiority or superiority of either male or female relationships.

Wright (1974) developed a conceptual model of friendship based on a conception of self that identifies, among other things, behavioral tendencies that function as self-referent motives. This model has been used to investigate differences in kin versus non-kin relationships with success (Wright, 1982). It appears the dimensions delineated in this model are valid for assessing interpersonal relationships in general. Interpersonal relationships are characterized by the following dimensions in this model: (TP = target person, or person being discussed by the respondent).

1. Voluntary Interdependence: The degree to which the plans and activities of one of the partners are contingent upon those of the other in the absence of outside pressures or constraints toward interaction.

   For example, "If I had a choice of doing two things I would seriously consider taking my second choice if it meant that TP and I could be together."

2. Person-qua-person: The degree to which the partners react to one another as unique, genuine and as irreplaceable in the relationship.

   "TP keeps me pretty well informed about his/her true feelings and attitudes about different things that come up."

3. Total Friendship: The two above criteria are considered together to provide an overall index of the relationships strength.

4. Ego-support Value: The degree to which people are valued because they are supportive, encouraging and in general, help the individual maintain an impression of him/herself as a competent worthwhile person.

   "TP considers me a good person to have around when he/she needs someone to talk things over with."

5. Self-affirmation Value: The degree to which people facilitate the recognition and expression of a person's most important and highly valued self-attributes.

   "TP does things with me in a way that helps me know and understand myself better."

6. Stimulation Value: The degree to which people are interesting and stimulating, and capable of fostering an expansion in a person's knowledge, ideas or perspectives.

   "TP is the kind of person from whom I can learn a lot just by listening to him/her talk or watching him/her work on a problem."

7. Utility Value: The degree to which people are valued because of their willingness and ability to use their own time and resources to help the individual meet him/her needs or reach various personal goals.

   "If I were sick or hurt, I could count on TP to do things that would make it easier to take."

8. Maintenance Difficulty: The degree to which one or both partners spend in clarifying actions or comments, soothing ruffled feelings, or exercising patience and restraint to keep the relationship intact.

   "I have to be very careful about what I say if I try to talk to TP about topics he/she considers controversial or touchy."

9. General Favorability: The degree to which a person tends to respond to another person in a generally favorable or unfavorable way in globally complimentary or noncomplimentary statements.

   "TP is a helpful, cooperative person."

A high quantity of the dimensions of voluntary interdependence and person-qua-person characterize a strong relationship with partners mutually willing to commit free time to each other and reacting to each other as unique and important individuals. Therefore, a strong, close interpersonal relationship should provide the person with a means of maintaining a sense of individuality, and fulfill a self-referent motive. The remaining dimensions of ego-support value, self-affirmation value, stimulation value and utility value all provide direct rewards to an individual. Strong or close relations would also be characterized by high values on these dimensions.

Maintenance difficulty is a structural dimension of interpersonal relationships, with a high value denoting problems in the dyadic relationship. General favorability is conceptualized as a diffuse, global dimension, similar to a "halo effect" when rating people.

It was hypothesized when comparing the close interpersonal relationships of elderly widows and widowers on the above dimensions that:

1. Women would rate voluntary interdependence, person-qua-person, total friendship, maintenance difficulty, ego-support, and self-affirmation value higher than men.

2. The relationship between sex and the dimensions of stimulation value, utility value and general favorability did not lend themselves to specific predictions, but were explored in the present investigation.

3. Both men and women would rate kin higher on utility value than non-kin; and non-kin higher on ego-support value, self-affirmation value and stimulation value.

## Methods

### Sample

Twenty-five caucasian widows and twenty-five widowers comprised

the sample for this study. All were volunteers living in Fayette County, Kentucky. (Lexington is the major city in Fayette County.) Requests for volunteers were made at various sites throughout the Lexington, Kentucky area (e.g., Senior Citizen meal sites, clubs, housing for seniors-independent, etc.). Only those individuals who had been widowed for less than six years and were 60 years or older were invited to participate. All subjects lived independently in the community. The women ranged in age from 61 to 83 (average age of 68.72) and had been widowed for an average of 3.8 years. The men ranged in age from 63 to 94, with an average age of 73.08 years. They had been widowed for an average length of 2.98 years. Employment and income status may be found in Tables 1 and 2.

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Insert Table 1 and 2 about here

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Procedure

Individual interviews were conducted at each respondent's home. This study was a larger study of social support and well-being in widowhood, therefore, the data reported presently constitutes only a portion of the data actually collected. Additional information not presently reported included measures of well-being, mood-state and functional health. A structured interview schedule was administered. Each respondent was requested to name the three people closest to him/her. An open-ended interview schedule collected information about their relationships with each of these people. Each respondent was then left with Wright's Acquantanceship Description Form (ADF) to complete for each of their three closest persons. The ADF is an 80 item questionnaire which

taps each of the eight dimensions conceptualized in Wright's Model of Friendship (ten items per dimension). In addition to the verbal instructions the experimenter provided, the respondent was also left with written directions to follow in the completion of this questionnaire. The subject was asked to rate each item on a seven point scale which ranged from "definitely applied or was always true" regarding their relationship with that person to "definitely not or was never true" (score 6, 0 respectively). Each respondent was provided with an addressed, stamped envelope for returning this material to the experimenter. The average interview was one and one half hours.

## Results

The ADF scored by summing the raw scores for each item by dimension, to obtain eight scale scores. The possible range of scores was thus 0-60, except for total friendship (0-120). Given the fact that this instrument had not previously been used with an elderly sample, the internal consistency of each of the separate scales (voluntary-interdependence) (VID); person-qua-person (PQP); ego-support value (ESV); self-affirmation (SAV); utility-value (UV); maintenance-difficulty (MD) and general favorability (GF)) was computed separately for each of the three close friends (e.g., ego-support for closest person, second closest and third closest). Table 3 illustrates this data. Alpha coefficients ranged from .76 to .96 for all of the scales, showing this instrument is internally consistent and

Insert Table 3 about here

hence reliable, for use in an elderly sample.

Separate 2 (sex) by 2 (kin vs. non-kin) analyses of variance were computed for each close person and independently for each of the eight dimensions described above, plus total friendship (VID + PQP). Females rated their closest person stronger on "total friendship" than did males ($F$ (1,49) = 4.24, $p < .05$). This significant effect was primarily the result of a significant difference between men and women on the dimension of "person-qua-person" which women rated higher than men ($F$ (1,49) = 4.64, $p < .04$). There were no significant sex differences in any of the remaining dimensions characterizing relationships with the three closest persons.

"Total-friendship" in the third closest person was rated as being stronger in relationships with relatives when compared to non-kin ($F$ (1,46) = 3.98, $p < .05$). This significant effect was primarily the result of relatives being rated higher on voluntary-interdependence than non-relatives ($F$ (1, 46) = 5.47, $p < .03$) as opposed to person-qua-person which was not significant (recall total friendship is composed of VID and PQP). The remaining analyses were insignificant.

To further clarify the above results, data were computed regarding the sex of the three close persons, relationship of the close persons to the respondent and frequency of interaction between respondent and close person (see Tables 4-6).

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Insert Tables 4, 5, and 6 about here

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Forty-four percent of the men reported that their closest persons were male, while 56% reported close persons to be female. However, 72% of the women reported their closest persons were female and only 28% reported male close persons. This difference in the percentage of same vs. cross-sex relationships for widow vs. widowers was repeated for the second and third closest persons. The majority of men's second and third closest persons were male (68% of the second closest and 68% the third closest), while women tended to name other women (76% of the second closest person were female and 88% of the third closest persons). Table 5 reveals that the closest person for both widows and widowers is a relative (76% are kin for the widows and 80% for the widowers). This is also true of the second closest person. Non-kin are named with increased frequency by both men and women for the third closest person (40%-45% are non-kin for widows and widowers respectively).

Table 6 illustrates the frequency of interaction between the elderly widowed and their three closest persons. Sixty-four percent of both men and women see their closest persons once a week or more. Forty-four percent of the women and 48% of the men see their second closest person once a week or more. Twenty-eight percent of the widows reported they saw their third closest person once a week or more, however 68% of the widowers saw these people once a week or more.

## Discussion

It was hypothesized that women would rate the following dimensions higher than men: VID, POP, TF, MD, ESV, and SAV. Results of the present study indicated support of this hypothesis only for the dimensions of TF

and PQP in the closest person. There were no significant sex differences for VID, MD, ESV OR SAV.

However, data approach significance for SAV with woman exhibiting a higher mean on this dimension than men (collapsing data across three people). The dimensions of SV, UV and GF exhibited no significant sex differences. SV tended to be rated higher by women than men, however, not significantly.

It was hypothesized men and women would rate kin higher on UV and lower on ESV, SAV and SV than non-kin. The only significant effects found were for the third closest person, with kin rated higher than non-kin on VID and TF. There was a non-significant tendency for women to rate kin higher than non-kin on UV, with men rating kin and non-kin similarily on this dimension. SAV exhibited no significant differences between kin and non-kin. Differences were however, in the predicted direction. SV also was non-significant for kin vs. non-kin for women and men. Men tended to rate non-kin higher on this dimension than kin, but not significantly.

Overall, the only significant sex differences in the present data appeared in the respondent's relationship with the closest person (TF and PQP). These differences were perhaps influenced by the fact that for widows this close person was typically a female relative, usually a daughter, while for men either a male or female relative (daughter, son or sibling). Tigges et al , (1980) reported older women are more likely to name confidantes that are female and/or daughers, while elderly men tend to name male or female confidantes.

The fact that women in the present study rated this close person as

more unique, open, honest, irreplaceable and that the relationship was characterized by a high level of interdependency may be partially a result of who this close person was. The female-female relationship has been characterized by higher levels of self-disclosure than the male-male or female-male relationship (Fisher, 1981). Additionally, within cross-sex relationships Hacker (1981) found women to disclose more than men. Perhaps higher levels of self-disclosure lead to an assessment of a relationship as more open and honest, but did not necessarily contribute to ego-support, given no sex differences were apparent in this dimension in the present study. The present data also indicated that frequency of interaction with this close person was similar for widows and widowers. Hence this quantitative indice does not reflect the qualitative differences found in PQP or TF for men vs. women. Similarly, no sex differences were apparent in the qualitative dimensions assessed for the third closest person, but, men and women drastically differed in the amount of contact they have with this person. Sixty-eight percent of the men saw their third closest person once a week or more, while only 28% of the women saw this person with the same level of frequency of interaction. Hence, greater frequency of interaction did not appear to be associated with a stronger or closer relationship when qualitative indices were assessed.

In conclusion, the present data did not indicate elderly widowers have inferior close interpersonal relationships when compared to elderly widows. Future research must direct itself to more specificity in delineating the qualitative nature of interpersonal relationships of the

elderly widowed before definitive conclusions may be drawn concerning sex differences and possibly the inferiority or superiority of these relationships is judged.

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Table 1

Percentage of Widowers and Widows by Employment Status

| | Widowers | Widows |
|---|---|---|
| Employed Full Time | 16% | 24% |
| Employed Part Time | 20% | 4% |
| Retired | 64% | 36% |
| Housewife | 0 | 36% |
| | 100% | 100% |

Table 2

Percentage of Widowers and Widows by Annual Level of Income

| Annual Income: | Widowers | Widows |
|---|---|---|
| $3,000 - 4,999 | 12% | 8% |
| $5,000 - 6,999 | 12% | 16% |
| $7,000 - 9,999 | 8% | 16% |
| $10,000 - 14,999 | 24% | 20% |
| $15,000 - 19,999 | 20% | 16% |
| $20,000 + | 24% | 24% |
| | 100% | 100% |

Table 3

Alpha Coefficients for Each of the ADF Scales by Close Person

| | Closest Person | Second Closest | Third Closest |
|---|---|---|---|
| ESV | .81 | .83 | .96 |
| PQP | .76 | .73 | .84 |
| SAV | .87 | .90 | .95 |
| MD | .67 | .80 | .71 |
| GF | .86 | .80 | .96 |
| SV | .91 | .91 | .94 |
| VID | .84 | .83 | .94 |
| UV | .86 | .83 | .82 |

Table 4

Percentage of Male and Female Close Persons for Widows and Widowers

| | Closest Person | | Second Closest | | Third Closest | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female |
| Widowers | 44% | 56% | 68% | 32% | 68% | 32% |
| Widows | 28% | 72% | 24% | 76% | 12% | 88% |

Table 5

Percentage of Kin and Non-Kin by Level of Close Person for Widows and Widowers

| | Closest Person | | Second Closest | | Third Closest | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Kin | Non-Kin | Kin | Non-Kin | Kin | Non-Kin |
| Widowers | 80% | 20% | 68% | 32% | 55% | 45% |
| Widows | 76% | 24% | 72% | 28% | 60% | 40% |

Table 6

Percentage of Respondents per Level of Interaction by Level of Close Person and Sex of Respondent

| | Closest Person | | Second Closest | | Third Closest | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Widow | Widower | Widow | Widower | Widow | Widower |
| Daily interaction | 32% | 40% | 16% | 20% | 8% | 13.6% |
| 1-3 times/week | 32% | 24% | 32% | 24% | 20% | 54.6% |
| twice a month | 0 | 12% | 12% | 16% | 8% | 9.1% |
| once a month | 4% | 12% | 12% | 12% | 20% | 0 |
| 1-4 times/year | 28% | 12% | 24% | 24% | 24% | 9.1% |
| once a year | 4% | 0 | 4% | 4% | 16% | 13.6% |
| never | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4% | 0 |
| | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% | 100% |